

CBT SSCE Requires Caution

TUNJI Alausa, the Minister of Education, has all but sealed the Federal Government's plan to eliminate pen and paper in the conduct of the Senior School Certificate Examinations. Starting next year, candidates will sit these exams exclusively on computers, in what is known as computer-based testing. While this shift may seem progressive, Alausa should tread with caution before a seemingly good policy backfires with destructive consequences. After observing a pilot CBT SSCE conducted by the National Examinations Council at a school in Abuja on July 22, Alausa was effusive with praise. "I must tell you I was impressed with what I saw," he said. "I am a very happy person today that NECO has transitioned from paper-based to CBT. By November this year, both NECO and WAEC exams will be fully CBT. And by 2026, all essays and objective exams will be computer-based." But are other West African stakeholders following the same path?

Deployed correctly, CBT could limit human interference and ease administrative burdens. However, in Nigeria, where millions of pupils, especially in rural areas, have never even seen a computer, let alone operated one, the plan is premature. It is tantamount to putting the cart before the horse. Secondary schools are critical in preparing students for tertiary education and the workforce, but currently, they struggle with poor funding, unqualified teachers, and abysmal infrastructure. Of Nigeria's N54.99 trillion budget this year, only a meagre 7.08 per cent was allocated to education—a decline from the 8.21 per cent in 2024. This falls far short of UNESCO's recommended minimum of 15 per cent. This inadequate funding explains why many schools lack basic classrooms, libraries, laboratories, and instructional materials such as computers and other ICT necessities. Stable electricity and reliable internet connectivity are absent in most public schools, making the desired learning outcomes difficult to achieve. This, more than anything else, proves that Nigeria is not yet ready for CBT. Recently, UTME candidates had to sit with candles and lanterns when power cutoffs hit parts of the country at night. Common issues such as unqualified teachers, poor remuneration, and

low teacher morale continue to undermine instructional quality. These endemic problems should be resolved before rushing to implement new exam modes. The country carries the heavy burden of 18.3 million out-of-school children, according to UNICEF. More than half of the girls in the North-East and North-West regions do not attend school at all. Prioritizing their return to education should precede imposing mandatory CBT for senior secondary school exams.

In Borno, Yobe, and Adamawa, over 800 schools reportedly remain closed, with nearly 500 classrooms destroyed and about 1,392 damaged due to the ongoing insurgency. Rehabilitating these war-torn schools must be at the forefront of government efforts, rather than being distracted by a fixation on grandiose exam reforms. Alausa waxed lyrical about patronizing CBT centres established by private investors, which only fuels suspicions that the government may have ulterior motives in its rush to enforce CBT. He appears to conflate the SSCE and UTME exams, but they are not the same. The SSCE is a certification exam assessing broad skills like critical thinking and creativity, while the UTME is a selection test focused mainly on objective questions.

CBT systems are poorly designed to evaluate the rigorous components of learning measured by SSCE, making it inappropriate to replace traditional essay-based assessments with computer testing. For example, in the United Kingdom, A-Level exams are still conducted in writing, not CBT. Nigeria's educational policies have a history of chaotic implementation, but reforms must benefit all stakeholders. Teacher training colleges that once produced competent teachers were abolished without replacements. The former A-Level certification, which provided suitable university entry, was also done away with. Likewise, the 6-5-4 education system was changed to a 6-3-3-4 system, aiming to prepare students for vocational skills or self-reliance. It has failed to deliver on either promise. This is why the death of the bill on arrival at the National Assembly is a step in the right direction.

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